**John 1:43-51 (ESV)**

**43**  The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” **44** Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. **45** Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” **46** Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” **47** Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” **48** Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” **49** Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” **50** Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” **51** And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

**“Underestimating Christ”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. During the long season of Pentecost, it never hurts to do something a little different. So today, we celebrate the minor festival of St. Bartholomew. Unlike, the more popular names noted among the apostles such as Peter, James, and John. Bartholomew is more like that person who makes it on American Idol or Dances with the Stars only to be forgotten about after the announcement of the top five. Rather than being directly called by Jesus, he ends up coming to Him via the word of his friend Philip. Bartholomew is his name listed formally among the apostles. However, today’s Gospel reading points out that he also went by the name Nathanael, which many miss.

How easy is it to underestimate those not on center stage? It happens all the time still today. Yet, every apostle had value just as every baptized member of the church has a place. The behind the scenes character of Bartholomew is a true witness to what Jesus said about His kingdom. “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you” (Luke 22:25-26). Bartholomew appears small in what Scriptures says, but tradition teaches that after the church was sent out by Christ. He went as missionary to India, [Ethiopia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopia), [Mesopotamia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesopotamia), [Parthia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parthia), [Lycaonia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lycaonia), and founded the church in Armenia.[[1]](#footnote-1) In some ways, his zeal for the Gospel turned out similar to St. Paul. Whatever the case, celebrating St. Bartholomew is all about underestimating how God works. Christ comes with the answer so that even heaven is opened through His Word.

When Philip called Nathanael, it came from what Jesus already gave him in faith. He said to his friend, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Yet, we discover that Nathanael was no pushover when it came to Scripture and neither naïve to the times. He said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Scripture talked about Bethlehem and Jerusalem, but Nazareth was a bit out of the territory for any messianic believing Jew. Besides, this small town by estimation had little to offer. The only response to reasons demands was Philip to say, “Come and see.” Of course, before any questions could cloud up the sinful mind even more. Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” It meant this man, Nathanael, belonged to those Israelites who were truly hoped for the promised Messiah.

Jesus sees beneath the surface of what men see. Deception is a fact in this sinful life clouding us in much darkness. The book of Revelation goes out of the way to state Satan is the “deceiver of the whole world” (12:9). Many like living in deception. It happens against the government, with a job, at school, towards a spouse, and even among the baptized. Yet, Jesus shows with Nathanael that He examines the depths of a man. He sees through the falsity at face value. God cannot be mocked. Nathanael was not sinless, but a compliment came to his character. He took seriously the hope of salvation for Israel rather than living in the deceptions of his times. In the same way, the church in our culture is drifting into darkness. Plenty are asking if anything good can come from it, like Nazareth. The only answer is “Come and see.” Jesus does not deceive, but speaks truth to sinners in need of the Savior. His Word persuades the soul to hear His voice and none other.

By the judgment rendered about him, Nathanael knew He was dealing with a Messiah far different from others. The only result was to ask, “How do you know me?” Jesus already proved that as God. He knows all people for who they are. More importantly, the life of any person is not passed over. He said, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Such a place under a fig tree likely served for prayer or devotions. Nathanael was not just living his life as if God has no part in it. Instead, He was searching the Old Testament for answers. He was making his suffering and concerns known to God. What Jesus says revealed the love sent from the Father in caring for every life. Nathanael provided the answer, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” As insignificant as St. Bartholomew might be, in the Gospel according to John he has the honor of being first to make such a confession of Christ. In relation to God, Jesus was true God and in relation to Israel He was true man the promised King come to save.

Jesus sees the spiritual cries of those before God. He sees the struggles of His Church. There is no need to pray under a fig tree. The tree of the cross has become the place of refuge for all the weary. St. Paul declares, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” God does not deceive sinners. He offers to forgive, restore, and save. Jesus’ suffering and death has proven the Father cares. If Jesus saw Nathanael, He sees everyone today. This seems too personal, too intruding, and too involved for worldly standards wanting to protect individual rights. However, no manmade laws stop God. Jesus sees into our life of suffering to save the sinner by His Word. He comes not accusing, but to lift up the broken hearted with His presence in the sacrament. As Proverbs points out, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Making the good confession will not compromise Christ and His Word for He stands against sin, death, and the Devil.

St. Bartholomew was quick to confess Christ without hesitation over Him as Lord and Savior. However, He did not fully grasp the depth of what it all meant. Jesus said, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these. Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” As God in the Old Testament opened heaven to Jacob in a dream with angels going up and down a ladder. Jesus was now the ladder keeping the door open for all who believe in Him. Not even death could close the promise God made by the cross. Nathanael witnessed this victory of the risen Jesus with the other apostles at the sea of Tiberius. Such a permanent promise fixed in heaven by the Gospel meant life at the present would not deceive St. Bartholomew. His martyrdom later in time was brutal, but Jesus told him he had better things to see than what this world could offer.

Jesus promises confessing Him is to see greater things. It does not come from works of the Law. It very well might come with the cross that appears nothing as comfort. However, Martin Luther remarks, “Wherever faith prevails and divine Word is treasured, there we find such radiance shining into our hearts that I have a clear vision of God as my Father, of the open heaven, of the angels about me, and of the help that is mine. Such a precious possession is ours in God’s Word and in the Christian faith. However, it is the way of the world not to care about the Word of God, to ridicule and despise it. For the world does not realize the power and effect of the Word…” (John commentary). It is not about our vision for the church or this life; because Jesus promised there are greater things to see. The angels ascend and descend upon Him and now on you by baptism into His Name. It is all about underestimating how God works. Christ comes with His answer so that even heaven is opened not merely for St. Bartholomew, but for you. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bartholomew\_the\_Apostle [↑](#footnote-ref-1)